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# The Challenges of Developing Distributed Leadership in Scottish Primary Schools

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**‘The Challenges of Developing Distributed Leadership  
in Scottish Primary Schools: a Catch 22’  
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**Abstract**

This article analyses the experiences and perceptions of headteachers taking forward a distributed perspective on school leadership. It reports on research conducted in Scottish primary schools through three case studies. It draws on findings from a sequence of headteacher interviews, staff questionnaire and sociometric analysis data. The article analyses the headteacher’s role within a distributed perspective. It presents and discusses key findings which suggest that headteachers are caught in a ‘catch 22’, having both an enabling and constraining effect. Implications are drawn for educational leadership at both school and system levels.

**Keywords:** distributed leadership, leadership, management, education policy

**Introduction**

Distributed leadership represents a distinct perspective on educational leadership and management. Arguably, it was born out of the move away from the solo, heroic, charismatic leader found to be ineffective in securing sustained school improvement (Day, 2009). In theory, distributed leadership provides opportunities to embed change through involving the many rather than the few in school leadership processes and practices. Although much has been written around the theme of distributed leadership, until recently, little of that discussion has been based on empirical data generated in schools. Since 2009, as more empirical studies have been published (see Harris, 2009a and Leithwood *et al.*, 2009), a more analytical perspective is developing, focused on the practice of distributed leadership. With that, has come a more critical examination of the way in which distributed leadership has been positioned in the policy rhetoric (Gunter, 2012) and a questioning as to whether or not the term itself is adequate to describe the realities of school leadership practice (Gronn, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Crowther, 2009).

This article contributes to that discussion not to be critical of the democratic principles that lie behind some constructions of distributed leadership but rather, to explore the problematic nature of its practice, situated within hierarchical school structures. Whilst UK and international education policy expectations and to an extent the field of educational leadership itself might position distributed leadership as the norm for ‘good practice’ (Mascall *et al.*, 2009; Timperley, 2009), headteachers and their staff are left to interpret the nuances of formal and informal school leadership working in tandem. In order to contextualise the discussion, the international literature is drawn, from with greater emphasis placed on that which is empirically based in primary school contexts.

This empirical study involved three primary school case studies. Its overall aim was to explore the experiences and perceptions of early career primary headteacher Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH) graduates in their early years of headship situating a distributed perspective on leadership in their schools, as promoted by school leadership literature, national policy and the SQH programme. Five main and one ancillary research question arose from the literature review:

- What do primary headteachers understand as distributed leadership?
- What do primary headteachers identify as the key characteristics of distributed leadership if they believe it to be embedded in the practice of their particular schools?
- To what extent, in the opinion of staff, do those characteristics currently operate in their particular schools?
- How do those primary headteachers think those characteristics have come about? (e.g. naturally and/or purposely planned for)
- What do primary headteachers (and their staff) perceive as the benefits and/or problems arising from operating a distributed perspective in practice?
- [What implications, if any, are there for leadership development with particular reference to the Scottish Qualification for Headship programme?]

The research used interpretative enquiry to reach a depth of understanding into staff perceptions. Each headteacher’s voice was highlighted through a sequence of in-depth, semi-structured and narrative style interviews. Each was encouraged to

articulate the rationale for and strategic intentions behind a distributed perspective, as well as the range of processes engaged with to progress that perspective. Staff perceptions of school leadership and management were gathered, including the extent to which leadership was viewed to be distributed within each school, through a 360° analysis, a semi-structured questionnaire incorporating a sociometric analysis of leadership relationships.

At various points of the research process, the problematic nature of distributed leadership surfaced. The headteachers and their staff seemed caught in a ‘catch 22’. Distributed leadership was found to be purposefully planned rather than spontaneous, developed intentionally in incremental stages, both on an individual and collective basis with teaching and support staff. The headteachers were aware of navigating a careful route, guided by their professional values. Each had developed their perspective within specific school contexts, purposefully progressing towards an understanding of what distributed leadership should look like in practice.

The headteachers and their staff identified a number of potential issues with a distributed perspective, linked to five generally held assumptions in the theoretical, policy and practice frames of reference (see Torrance 2013/14a?): that every staff member is able or wishes to lead; that the leadership role of staff is legitimized simply by the headteacher’s endorsement; that a distributed perspective occurs naturally and is unproblematic. To large extent, distributed leadership was found to be ‘in the gift of the headteacher’ (see Torrance 2013/14b?).

The central role of the headteacher emerged across the case studies, forming the focus of this article. In that regard, illustrative themes are explored: a hierarchical perspective of distributed leadership; the headteacher’s role in actively modelling, enabling and encouraging its development; keeping things safe; developing the professional identity of staff. Each is revealed, then discussed in relation to the policy-practice interface.

## **The Literature**

Leadership may have always been distributed within school organizations but as a theoretical concept, it is relatively new (Timperley, 2009). Currently, the distinctiveness of distributed leadership lies in its *'function as a rallying-point for those commentators searching for "post-heroic" leadership alternatives'* (Gronn, 2008; Gronn, 2009b: 18; Spillane, 2005b; Woods and Gronn, 2009) and in its resonance with organisational learning within the knowledge economy (Hartley, 2010). In education, distributed leadership is, *'a relatively "new kid on the block"'* (Gronn, 2006:1) now *'display[ing] a number of the hallmarks of survival'* (Gronn, 2008: 141; Gronn, 2009a: 197).

Identifying what distributed leadership is proves problematic, given the degree of debate within academic and professional discourse. The term is heavily contested (MacBeath, 2009), rarely fulfilling *'its lofty promises'* (Duignan, 2008: 4). Competing discourses, lead to lack of consensus as to what constitutes distributed leadership theory and practice. Definitions and understandings range from normative to descriptive, leading to competing and conflicting interpretations (Leithwood *et al.*, 2009a). The extensive range of writings on and around the subject lacks empirical substance (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Leithwood *et al.*, 2009a and 2009b; Robinson, 2009; Spillane *et al.*, 2007; Spillane *et al.*, 2009a), leading to limitations in empirical understandings.

In the UK, distributed school leadership has been politically endorsed. The policy direction and policy documents are full of its rhetoric. It forms the popular discourse of contemporary school education literature although few authors and researchers define distributed leadership in and for their work (Spillane and Diamond, 2007). A common view or singular definition is lacking (Duignan, 2008; Harris and Spillane, 2008). Staff in schools may attribute different meanings to the term and its practice (Duignan, 2008: 4): *'It is unwise to assume because we share a common language or use a specific term that we all share a common meaning'*.

The working definition selected for this study was that offered by Harris and Spillane (2008: 31) who use the term *'distributed leadership perspective'* whereby multiple leaders, formally recognized or not, engage in a wide range of leadership and management activities, where *'leadership and management play out in tandem in*

*practice*' (Spillane and Diamond, 2007: 152-3). Its focus is on the interactions in leadership practice and the corresponding influence on improvement. Those interactions concern *'both formal and informal leadership and the way they produce different patterns of activity'* (Harris, 2008: 31). This model also recognizes that distributed leadership has multiple realities, reflecting different ways in which leadership is stretched over leaders, followers and situation in collaborated, coordinated or collective patterns. This conceptualisation draws from a definition of leadership itself, defined by Spillane and Coldren (2011: 78) as *'a relationship of social influence'*. When leadership is located in a relationship of social influence, expertise rather than formal position forms the basis of authority (Timperley, 2009).

Further to the problematic nature of defining distributed leadership, Harris (2005: 14) cautions that whilst distributed leadership may have a strong theoretical basis, examples of it in practice are difficult to find, attributed in part to a gradual shift from vertical to lateral forms of leadership. Furthermore, Harris and Spillane (2008: 32) acknowledge, *'how leadership is distributed and with what effect is relatively uncharted territory'*. A decade ago, Gronn (2003: 284) suggested that perhaps it was time to consider whether distributed leadership equated to *'designer leadership'* since it represented little more than a desirable construct rather than a robust field in itself. Leithwood *et al.* (2004: 7) added to that critique proposing that if it was to survive and thrive, then it would need to stand up to scrutiny. Without such discussion *"distributed leadership" [was] in danger of becoming no more than a slogan'*.

Perhaps, rather than distributed leadership, hybrid leadership (Gronn, 2009b: 17; 20; 35; 36) might provide a more accurate term, with its *'mixed leadership patterns'* reflecting the *'constantly shifting leadership mix or configuration'* within the *'division of labour that operates in schools ... represent[ing] an attempt by schools to accommodate contingency'* and respond to the organisation's *'need for intelligence'*. Or, perhaps rather than distributed leadership, parallel leadership (Crowther, 2009: 53) would be a more accurate description, conceptualizing a *'process whereby teacher leaders and their principals engage in collective action to build school capacity'*. If leadership is defined as *'a relationship of social influence'* (Spillane and Coldren, 2011: 76), then what follows is a discussion of whose influence and for what

purpose? If leadership is perceived as *'a fluid practice that changes with the situation'* (Spillane and Coldren, 2011: 32), then many things become possible.

Beyond the politically endorsed rhetoric, emerging empirical findings suggest distributed leadership does not necessarily negate the need for formal leaders, particularly headteachers. The headteacher's facilitating role forms a paradox within a distributed perspective (Hallinger and Heck, 2009; Leithwood *et al.*, 2009c; Louis *et al.*, 2009; Mayrowetz *et al.*, 2009) in which *'school principals figure very prominently'* (Leithwood *et al.*, 2009b: 279; Murphy *et al.*, 2009). Both Gronn and Spillane recognise the importance of the relationship and interactions between formal and informal leaders. In their work, the leadership role of the headteacher remains key (Spillane *et al.*, 2009b). However, there is little empirical data available to shed light on the role of the headteacher.

A number of recently published studies have identified the key role of the headteacher within a distributed perspective. The findings from Anderson *et al.*'s (2009: 112) multi-site case study of the principal's role in the distribution of leadership in five US elementary and middle schools *'highlight[ed] the prominence of principals in determining alternative patterns of leadership distribution at the school level and in relation to specific improvement goals and initiatives'*. Hallinger and Heck (2009: 105; 114) analysed data from empirical studies available on distributed leadership for school improvement across 200 elementary schools in one US state, concluding that through their role in *'being catalysts for change, maintaining the improvement focus, facilitating the leadership of others, supporting instructional effectiveness, and providing tangible support for staff and students'*, distributed leadership did *'not appear to lessen the importance of the principal's own leadership role'*. Indeed, Leithwood *et al.* (2009c) found in their study of eight US elementary and secondary schools that a distributed perspective placed increased demands on the headteacher's role in relation to increased coordination, building leadership capability in staff, monitoring others' leadership work and providing constructive feedback to those engaged in leadership work. Similarly, Murphy *et al.* (2009: 181) in their case study of a US middle school (as part of a larger longitudinal study of six schools) concluded that the headteacher's role was pivotal in *'work[ing] to overcome culture, structural and professional barriers to create a leadership dense organisation'*.

Day (2009) conducted a case study over seven years into one headteacher's role in her first headship, focused on turning a UK primary and nursery school threatened with closure around. He found the headteacher concerned moved through four phases of development: coming out of special measures; taking ownership within an inclusive agenda; going deeper and wider to sustain momentum; striving for excellence and creativity within which everyone was perceived as a leader. Day (2009: 121; 136) contends, *'whilst there may be many leaders in a school, the principal is the key to bringing about and sustaining successful change'*, asserting the school's turnaround was *'in no small measure due to the values, qualities and skills of its headteacher'*. In Day's (2009) view, it is the headteacher who encourages stakeholders to participate in and develop a sense of ownership for school improvement processes and outcomes, leading to commitment for sustained change.

Mayrowetz *et al.*'s (2009: 179) study of six US secondary schools engaged in distributed leadership reform efforts found that headteachers, through their formal authority and accountability, played a key role in establishing and maintaining a coherent vision, avoiding incoherence. Dinham's study (2005 as reported in 2009: 142) of 38 government secondary schools with exceptional educational outcomes in New South Wales, identified the key role of the headteacher in, for example, encouraging and supporting others *'to develop and exercise their own leadership'*. Mascall *et al.* (2009: 82) analysed data from an empirical study of 150 elementary and 30 high schools into leadership practice in one Canadian school district asserting:

*leadership distribution not only exists in parallel with traditional individual leadership, but that the extent of leadership distribution is dependent on strong individual leadership from a formal leader.*

Timperley's (2009) study of seven New Zealand elementary schools focusing on school improvement initiatives found that headteachers played a key role within a distributed perspective. Leithwood *et al.*'s (2009c) qualitative study of eight elementary and secondary schools in phase one of a two-stage multi-method study situated in Ontario based its hypothesis on Gronn's work, conceptualising four patterns of distributed leadership: planful alignment, spontaneous alignment, spontaneous misalignment and anarchic misalignment. That study found that planful alignment even when leadership was distributed to teams, was dependent on the



headteacher.

### **The Study, its Methods and Sample**

This study encompassed small-scale empirical research employing interpretative enquiry with aspects of a grounded approach, reaching a depth of understanding of how the actors within a small number of primary schools made sense of distributed leadership. Three case studies utilised multi-methods to generate different data sets, emphasising qualitative methods, getting at actors' understandings of a distributed perspective through the headteachers. The headteachers' voices were highlighted through a sequence of four in-depth, semi-structured interviews, one of which adopted a narrative style. The interviews, designed to elicit flow in the headteachers' thinking, resulted in expansive narratives. In addition, the headteachers were each asked to keep a reflective diary, for a four-week duration. Vignettes from the interviews and diaries exemplified key findings.

Staff perceptions of school leadership and management were also elicited through a 360° analysis, a semi-structured questionnaire. That 360° questionnaire explored the extent to which leadership was distributed. It incorporated a sociometric analysis of the leadership relationships within each school. In this way, the headteachers explored different meanings and alternative perspectives, first reflecting on their own experiences and perceptions of purposefully taking forward a distributed perspective, then reflecting on the experiences and perceptions of their staff. In so doing, the 'lived' performance and 'designed' organisation were explored in tandem (Spillane and Coldren, 2011).

The research was '*a combination of both experience and reasoning*' (Cohen *et al.*, 2006: 5) with an iterative process employed, moving back-and-forth between data gathered and theory proposed (Charmaz, 2006). The research began with experience as expressed in the lived and told stories (Charmaz, 2006; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) of the headteachers, instead of beginning with theory. Each case study comprised an account of one headteacher's perspective on and practice of distributed leadership. Three single-site case studies were conducted in sequence over an

eighteen month period with a slight overlap between the completion of one and the commencement of the next.

Primary headteachers were selected since the literature (e.g. Bell, 2007; Spillane's work) suggested key differences between the size, structures and complexity of primary and secondary schools would make it difficult to draw parallels between the sectors. The purposive sample comprised three headteachers of primary schools within the same Scottish local authority having been subject to the same recruitment and selection criteria and procedures. A review of the literature (e.g. Day, 2009; Pascal and Ribbins, 1998) suggested that by drawing from headteachers who had been in post for around two years, having had sufficient time to become established and begun to take forward their perspective on leadership and management whilst still thinking through their actions and intentions, reflections on practice would be enhanced. The headteachers' ages ranged from 33 to 40 years. Educated within the same education 'era', it was thought that they would have a similar historic and professional policy frame of reference. Each headteacher was known in their local authority as promoting a distributed perspective on leadership and management.

Each headteacher was a SQH graduate, having been conferred with both a Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management by the University of Edinburgh, and the professional award of the SQH by the Scottish Government, having met the competences of the Standard for Headship (SfH) (SEED, 2005). The programme leading to the SQH is premised around critical reflection on the theory of educational leadership and management in and on work-based practice. Speculatively, the headteachers were familiar with the policy frame and had been exposed to clear expectations that SQH participants take forward a distributed perspective. They were considered to have an informed understanding of what a distributed perspective comprised in relation to their own practice. Prior to engagement with the study, each headteacher confirmed a commitment to a distributed perspective on leadership in their schools, as promoted by school leadership literature, national policy, the SfH and the SQH programme.

## **The Findings**

Each of the headteachers [HT1; HT2; HT3] was committed to a distributed perspective, perceiving it as integral to their practice: *'if I'm serious about distributed leadership then it's the whole package'*, *'It's who I am'* [HT1]. Their commitment derived from experience, observation of effective and less effective practice, and perceived impact. That ideology was broadly reflected in the data gathered. However, distributed leadership was identified as complex and multi-faceted in nature. Each headteacher was very much at the helm of school leadership and recognised this as potentially enabling and constraining, as can be seen from the following reflections on their own practice.

### *A Hierarchical Perspective*

The centrality of the headteacher was a recurring theme throughout the data gathered. It was most visibly striking across the sociograms where although patterns of distributed leadership varied, the dominant role of the headteacher remained constant. Each recognized her role within a distributed perspective:

*'I see the influence that I've had over them coming back to me positively'*  
[HT1]  
*'I could see my influence in it, you know ... I suppose it's like the queen bee, she does have quite a say in how the hive works, you know [laughed]. Whether she knows it or not.'* [HT2]

Each headteacher remained central to how distributed leadership operated in terms of retaining overall power and influence, retaining strategic control over the direction of school improvement, providing legitimisation to staff leadership. Distributed leadership was to large extent 'in the gift of the headteacher', the result of purposeful planning, situated within the headteacher's expectations for how leadership operated, dependent on their role, pacing the rate and extent of distribution, setting the parameters for staff engagement. Although they felt teachers were empowered to lead, the extent of teacher influence appeared in the main confined to the curriculum, and to teaching, learning and assessment matters. In the second school, this extended to pupil care, welfare and/or pastoral concerns. In this way, teachers' influence was operational. Such parameters appeared both set by the headteacher in legitimising the nature of leadership roles for teachers, and set by the teachers themselves.

A hierarchical perspective pervaded the feedback gathered from staff: *'you can't ignore there's a hierarchy there, there is'* [HT3]. In contrast to the inclusive language used by each headteacher, the unintended language of hierarchy surfaced at various points:

*and I don't mean this in a hierarchical way, but as low down as a teacher or an auxiliary or whatever distributing it even further to their colleagues* [HT1]

HT3 frequently expressed discomfort in colluding with what might be termed contrived collegiality, raising on a number of occasions a concern with how much distributed leadership was about the manipulation of staff. She also raised an inherent contradiction and questioned within a truly distributed perspective whether the headteacher role would become obsolete:

*...maybe the ultimate sort of distributed leadership model, I don't know if the headteacher would necessarily be sitting here. ... I think while the head's sitting here, 'the head', 'the management', I think we'll get pretty much what we've always got, you know. And I think it will be some kind of major structural change to the whole system that's going to create a distributed leadership role and, you know... I think that something big like that has to happen before you'll see much of a, a change.* [HT3]

#### *Modelling, Enabling and Encouraging*

In contrast to delegation, distributed leadership commanded substantial time commitment as each headteacher encouraged, reassured, developed confidence, modelled behaviours, scaffolded support, *'up-skilled'* [HT3], facilitated, equipped, maintained an overview, acted as gatekeeper to more formal leadership roles, fulfilled a management role with respect to quality assurance and timings. This resulted in a changed rather than reduced role or workload:

*It's really just about relationships and not delegating as such but leading in a sort of more democratic way and saying 'look this is what we're aiming for, what will we do?'. And make it more of a shared understanding. ... It's friendly. It's collegiate and it's collaborative.* [HT3]

*I wouldn't say it lessens your workload. You're not physically doing it all yourself. But you still have a coach mentor role that you have to play ... So they did need my input, just to give a supportive layer underneath what they were doing. ... So, it didn't lessen my workload but what it did do is it made the impact of the school improvement plan greater.* [HT1]

The headteacher's role appeared to focus on three key aspects: modelling, enabling and encouraging.

## Modelling

HT1 purposefully began by modelling the process for the deutes: *'They watched what I did and they started doing it too'* [HT1]. For HT3, modelling consistency of approach and adhering to agreed principles were key. What she refused to do became almost as important as what she did, refusing to step in and make decisions when staff struggled to come to consensus. She had developed an appreciation that there could also be negative consequences to modelling processes: *'sometimes you support the bit you don't want to see by the way you behave'* [HT3]. Such modelling was apparent in many of the processes described:

*I'm always trying to model the way that I would do it. And hope that it starts to rub off on the other leaders, at whatever level they're at within the school.*  
[HT2]

## Enabling

The headteachers described a range of processes that had enabled them to begin to develop distributed leadership: *'I think [DL] is enabled and facilitated by me'* [HT2]. Their enabling influence was often implicit, as in the organisation and strategic deployment of staff which had a facilitative effect on patterns of distributed leadership: *'actually we're engineering that'* [HT1]. Each headteacher had responsibility for the recruitment of staff, a key considered for which was candidates' willingness to engage in taking the school forward. Each had responsibility for the deployment of teaching staff with the sociograms suggesting placing teachers in relation to others when assigning classes brought about professional understandings leading to positive regard and enduring working relationships. By purposefully assigning staff, key players had the opportunity to emerge and patterns of influence had the opportunity to develop. Teamwork became established, drawing on team members' strengths: *'you have to allow that relationship to develop'* [HT1]. Each also had responsibility for the deployment of support staff and their associated timetabling, providing opportunities for taking forward leadership roles.

Such purposeful planning was ongoing, as evident in the way in which HT1 drew from the data to understand her school further and identify next steps for future development, HT2 engaged staff in identifying priorities and strategies for school improvement, and HT3 developed *'design briefs'* for staff progressing school

improvement initiatives. Getting to know each individual staff member, what made them ‘tick’ and ‘*pushing their buttons*’ [HT3] appeared to be paramount, individualising expectations:

*finding out what their interests are and how they would like to be involved ... it comes from lots of different interactions with your staff ... I do know my staff very very well. [HT2]*

### Encouraging

The headteachers employed a number of strategies to engage staff in leadership practices. Individual teachers and support staff were encouraged and supported to take on leadership roles: ‘*I think I get the best out of people*’ [HT2]. Such roles were aligned to the school’s improvement plan with notably few staff reporting a bottom-up approach to assuming responsibility for taking forward new initiatives. The headteachers made considerable effort to get to know their staff and where each teacher was on the leadership spectrum, gauging their stage of readiness to assume leadership roles. In so doing, they were able to target encouragement and support. A process of differentiated guided support was utilised within which staff were encouraged to make the most of ‘*provided opportunities*’ [HT2] to take forward a leadership role, constituting ‘*more mentoring than distributed leadership*’ [HT1].

HT1 began by focusing on the ‘enthusiastic’ members of staff, harnessing both their enthusiasm and standing with their peers to take things to the next level. The headteachers capitalized on teachers with an understanding of a distributed perspective, including targeting those undertaking postgraduate/structured professional development: ‘*I said to them... you can take it and you can run with it... So, they bit my hand off at that opportunity*’ [HT1]. The enthusiasm of individuals was harnessed to create ‘*the ripple*’ effect: ‘*I begun to be able to identify staff who were really interested in leadership... and we facilitated leadership roles for them. If they wanted it they would get it*’ [HT1]. Less enthusiastic or less confident teachers were also involved: ‘*and that’s given her a bit of growth and a bit of encouragement as well so she feels really valued for that*’ [HT1]. Staff perceived as presenting barriers or resistance to developing a distributed perspective were circumvented.

By starting small, utilising established practices within the school from which new processes were introduced, ‘*buy in*’ [HT1] was secured first by staff enthusiastic to

take up leadership roles and then by further staff. For HT2, the school's self-evaluation process was key: *'something that I have been very keen to get embedded into what they do'*. That process was *'ongoing'*, leading to *'people being encouraged to take on leadership roles'* [HT2]. Considerable emphasis was placed on the continuing professional development (CPD) of all staff, with CPD reviews considered paramount. Leadership development formed a key aspect of the professional review and development process. HT2 engaged individually with staff members to review their professional development needs, areas of interest and how both could be brought together for the good of the individual and school. HT3 differentiated support in recognition that there were staff she kept *'a closer eye on'*.

### *Keeping Things Safe*

Each headteacher felt distributed leadership was, to an extent, embedded in the culture of the school, that it was *'a given'* [HT1]. The headteachers set an expectation of a distributed perspective, being explicit in *'valuing the work of others'*, intentionally *'providing opportunities'* [HT2] to develop staff leadership capabilities:

*I think an awful lot of it is to do with me being really, really clear about values. It's about exemplifying it in everything I do.* [HT1]

Distributed leadership did not, however, entail staff having full autonomy over what they wished to develop since that would *'just be chaos'* [HT3]. Moreover, each headteacher was fully aware of the multiple and competing accountabilities placed on them. HT3 was acutely aware of the *'risk'* and *'measured risk'* inherent in *'allowing people'* to lead and *'letting people have distributed leadership'*. She articulated, *'It's almost like I've done my risk assessment on that member of staff and they're okay, you know'*. She saw part of her role as *'making sure the leader is clear'* without creating a *'straightjacket'*, since *'you only give people enough rope to hang themselves, and not the school'*.

Each headteacher employed a number of enabling structures to develop distributed leadership within clear expectations. HT1 developed an extended management team, with open membership to all staff on a rota basis. She also developed a leadership group to support the development of teachers interested in developing their leadership role. HT3 prioritized the development of school policies and design briefs for taking

forward school improvement initiatives. Each perceived providing staff with time to take forward leadership roles through formal structures key. It was the headteachers who ensured regular staff meeting time was embedded into collegiate time arrangements to ensure priorities were given prominence: *'I have regular meetings and formal and informal meetings with all of the staff'* [HT2].

### *Developing the Professional Identity of Staff*

What emerged from the headteachers' reflections was their development of staff professional identity to assimilate leadership. This began with the headteacher's own professional identity, extending to how she perceived the role of a teacher more generally. Each was still be making sense of the role of support staff within a distributed perspective.

### The Professional Identity of Headteachers

The headteachers' own professional identities had developed in relation to: leadership and management experience over a number of years and across different contexts; understanding of school improvement practices to which they felt distributed leadership made a positive contribution; understanding of the literature on school improvement from postgraduate study which underpinned reflections on and understandings of practice; understanding of the policy discourse. Each articulated a clear understanding both of their role and intentions behind a distributed perspective:

*I needed to be quite high profile in what I did so they could see all the bits I was doing.* [HT1]

*I wanted things to change. I wanted it to look different, I wanted people to be more engaged and ...feel good about themselves, I suppose. And feel that they could contribute.* [HT3]

### The Professional Identity of Teachers

The headteachers were purposefully developing teachers' identity to include leadership as an integral part of their professional role. There was an explicit and public expectation that all teachers had a leadership role to play although privately, they recognized some lacked capability or would *'just rather not be leading'* [HT2]. They appreciated that for some that change might never come and for others, such transformation might not be permanent:



*because they're grappling with the traditional view they have of a teacher, who is someone who works in just their own classroom with four walls around them.* [HT1]

*Over the past 3 years, a few have resented being asked to do 'the headteacher's job.'* [HT2]

The headteachers perceived they played a significant role in developing teachers' engagement within a distributed perspective, *'equip[ping] people with the confidence to, to go and have a go at doing things'* [HT2]. They believed on the whole, teachers had developed a new sense of professional identity with increased *'professionalism'* [HT1] and confidence. They engaged much more in school improvement processes, motivated by the leadership roles they played, leading to them *'feel[ing] good about themselves'* and *'feel[ing] that they could contribute'* [HT3]. Teachers were thought to have a sense of empowerment and associated with that, *'talk[ed] a lot more about learning and teaching'* [HT1]. There was an indication from teachers' feedback that for some, taking on a leadership role was not considered an integral part of their professional identity, leading to resentment by others. Teachers' involvement in leadership roles was far from uniform, there was a spectrum of understanding and engagement, dependent on specific staff in key leadership roles. Staff required *'reassurance during times of decision-making'* to reduce anxiety [HT2]. The third headteacher raised the concern that staff sometimes only saw things from within their *'own wee bubble'*, lacking wider political awareness. Part of the headteachers' role in developing the individual and collective identity of teachers involved managing expectations in relation to national professional agreements.

There was a perceived distinction between teacher perceptions of a leadership role within the semi-private context of the classroom, and the public context outwith the classroom. Beyond the classroom, the professional identity of teachers had not yet extended to 'teacher as leader': *'there's one or two who still haven't got there yet and who potentially might not'* [HT1]; *'there are people who don't want a leadership role'* [HT3]. When taking forward a school leadership role, it seemed necessary to have an endorsed designated title, legitimizing both role and actions taken.

#### The Professional Identity of Support Staff

Support staff also played an essential role within the headteachers' distributed perspective. Overall support staff did not appear to be perceived by colleagues other than the headteacher, as having a recognised leadership role within the school's public spaces or within semi-private classroom spaces. HT1 and HT3 recognised support staff were signaling they felt underutilised and that in developing the culture of the school further, the leadership potential of support staff could be addressed. In the second school a tension existed between support and teaching staff when their leadership domains overlapped.

The leadership exercised by teachers was not focused on their professional relationship with support staff. Through the analysis of the sociometric data, the first and third headteachers became concerned about the apparent dislocation of support staff from the patterns of teacher leadership influence: *'It is a concern and it is a worry'* [HT1]; *'a completely different experience at work than the teachers'* [HT3]. They did not appear to have the same access to or ability to create networks and hubs as did the majority of teaching staff. The headteachers analysed potential reasons behind that apparent dislocation suggesting there was a perceived hierarchy at play within which, support staff *'don't feel that they can have a, an influencing discussion'* [HT1]; *'it's almost like two cultures running alongside each other'* [HT3].

Support staff did not perceive themselves to be leaders: *'still this reluctance to take on a real sort of leadership role'* [HT3]. Notable, was the lack of leadership perceived to be exercised by support staff within the semi-private spaces of the classroom. There was one partial exception, regarding 'pupil care, welfare and/or personal concerns'. In that regard, support staff appeared to have a legitimised leadership role where they had had a longstanding relationship with a child who required a high degree of additional support. The new class teacher might perceive the support staff as expert in supporting that child. Individual support staff might therefore be perceived as having a leadership role, albeit a very defined, contained, specific role.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

The small number of empirical studies exploring the theory of distributed leadership in school practice (Hallinger and Heck, 2009; Harris 2009b and 2009c; Leithwood *et al.*, 2009a and 2009b) and the smaller number of empirical studies into the

headteacher's role within such practice (Murphy *et al.*, 2009) makes it difficult to ascertain from the literature how the characteristics of distributed leadership come about. This study set out to find out more, exploring whether the characteristics of distributed leadership come about naturally or through purposeful planning. Its focus on empirically based case study research, provided primary headteachers committed to its practice a substantial voice in the findings, informed by feedback on the 'lived reality' (Spillane and Coldren, 2011) of staff in their schools. In so doing, a better understanding of the headteacher's role within a distributed perspective was sought.

Each of the three case study headteachers was articulate, highly reflective and committed to a distributed perspective on leadership and management. Their motivation was essentially to develop the school as a learning community, to positively impact on pupils' educational experience. Correspondingly, they regarded staff as the most valuable resource expending considerable effort supporting their leadership development. Each headteacher prioritised getting to know each member of staff, building trust and communicating a vision for the school and in so doing, encouraging and enabling staff to engage in school leadership processes and practices. Although much had been achieved in that regard, it was still work in progress and had not developed into a 'bottom-up' approach to school improvement.

A distributed perspective in practice was complex and multi-faceted in nature and school context played a critical role. Staff were on a journey, learning together. Parameters appeared both set by the headteacher in legitimising the nature of teachers' leadership roles, and set by the teachers themselves. Distributed leadership remained very much, 'in the gift of the headteacher', central to its operation in terms of: retaining overall power and influence; retaining strategic control over the direction of school improvement; and providing legitimisation to staff leadership. Distributed leadership appeared the result of purposeful planning requiring time and commitment from the headteacher. She was instrumental, whether through direct action or an indirect facilitative role. She set an expectation for how leadership operated and played a key role in a distributed perspective. In that regard, the headteacher required to have knowledge and understanding of both a distributed perspective and of school staff.

This study marks a clear departure from much of the research within the field to date, since little is yet known about *'the interplay between the formal and informal leadership structures and processes'*, the *'relationship between principal and teacher leadership'* or *'the formal and informal leadership interdependencies and interconnections'* (Harris, 2009c: 242). This study contributes to existing knowledge since, *'We undoubtedly need empirical studies that highlight both the inadequacies of distributed leadership practice, as well as the possibilities'* (Harris, 2009b: 19). The main inadequacy this article highlights is the lack of understanding of the central importance of the headteacher role in developing a distributed perspective on leadership. In effect, they are caught in a 'catch 22'. Their role is essential yet they retained overall power and influence, strategic control over the direction of school improvement and the gate keeping function behind the legitimisation of staff leadership.

Those findings are in keeping with those from other studies. Day *et al.* (2007b) identified that headteachers largely determined the nature and pattern of distribution according to their own view of leadership and stage of development, as well as their perception of the readiness of their staff to take on greater leadership. Similarly, Murphy *et al.* (2009) found that the headteacher was instrumental in initiating and nurturing distributed leadership. The NCSL (2004, 3.1: 7) found, *'distributed leadership was usually given, not taken'*, with heads employing six processes depending on the situation: formal distribution (within hierarchical structures); pragmatic distribution (ad hoc by nature); strategic distribution (goal oriented); incremental distribution (a measured 'letting go'); opportunistic distribution (dispersed, taken rather than given); and cultural distribution (embedded in the organisation, based on agency and reciprocity).

Devoid of guidance from the theory or policy rhetoric, the headteachers surfaced a range of challenges encountered in progressing a distributed perspective on leadership:

*...it's important that if you ask people to take on a role that they are supported and developed to do it. ... We need to make sure that these people have got the support and guidance and the skills to do it. Which is different from micro managing and controlling it. And, you know, that's a fine line that we mustn't cross either. [HT1]*

The findings contribute to a growing debate about the conception of leadership and its distributed perspective. Whilst traditional school structures remain, it may be that *'The "heterarchy" of distributed leadership resides uneasily within the formal bureaucracy of schools'* (Hartley, 2010: 282). Despite the rhetoric, schools are still developing professional knowledge, understanding and practice. Hammersley-Fletcher and Brundrett (2008: 15) argue:

*there perhaps needs to be a greater honesty about where authority lies, who has a right to exercise it and when, together with a greater understanding of the complexity of the head teacher's position as the school leader and what can reasonably be asked of them.*

More empirical studies are needed (Harris *et al.*, 2007: 345) since: *'Without this evidence, we might as well start looking for the next leadership theory'*.

## **Conclusion**

Since few empirical studies have been conducted into the practice of distributed leadership and its effects, contemporary policy discourse relating to distributed leadership could at best be described as aspirational, having normative potential. At worst it could be described as prescriptive and politically driven, promoting collegiality for workforce reform within flatter school management structures, taking forward the school improvement agenda as efficiently as possible, addressing the perceived headteacher recruitment and retention crisis.

It is hoped that this study contributes to a conversation about what distributed leadership might be and how it is currently operationalised in schools. Further discussion is merited as to whether 'distributed' is the best word to describe the lived reality of school leadership. If as this study would suggest, the headteacher's role is so crucial to a distributed perspective, perhaps 'distributed leadership' is an oxymoron. Perhaps it is time to look for adverbs that better describe leadership processes and practices. A return to debate what educational leadership is, along with its purpose, would seem sagacious. From there, a shared language could provide the medium with which to move forward.

A hybrid or parallel perspective on leadership might more accurately depict the distinct and complementary nature of and focus for formal and informal leadership

roles. Perhaps it is time to reconceptualise the role of the headteacher and the purpose of educational leadership focused on direction setting, human development and organizational development. If the headteacher role is to remain, then that role needs to be re-examined in relation to the leadership roles of others within the school organization. Otherwise, it seems likely that distributed leadership will remain ‘in the gift of the headteacher’. Without such reconceptualisation, headteachers seem trapped in a ‘catch 22’.

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